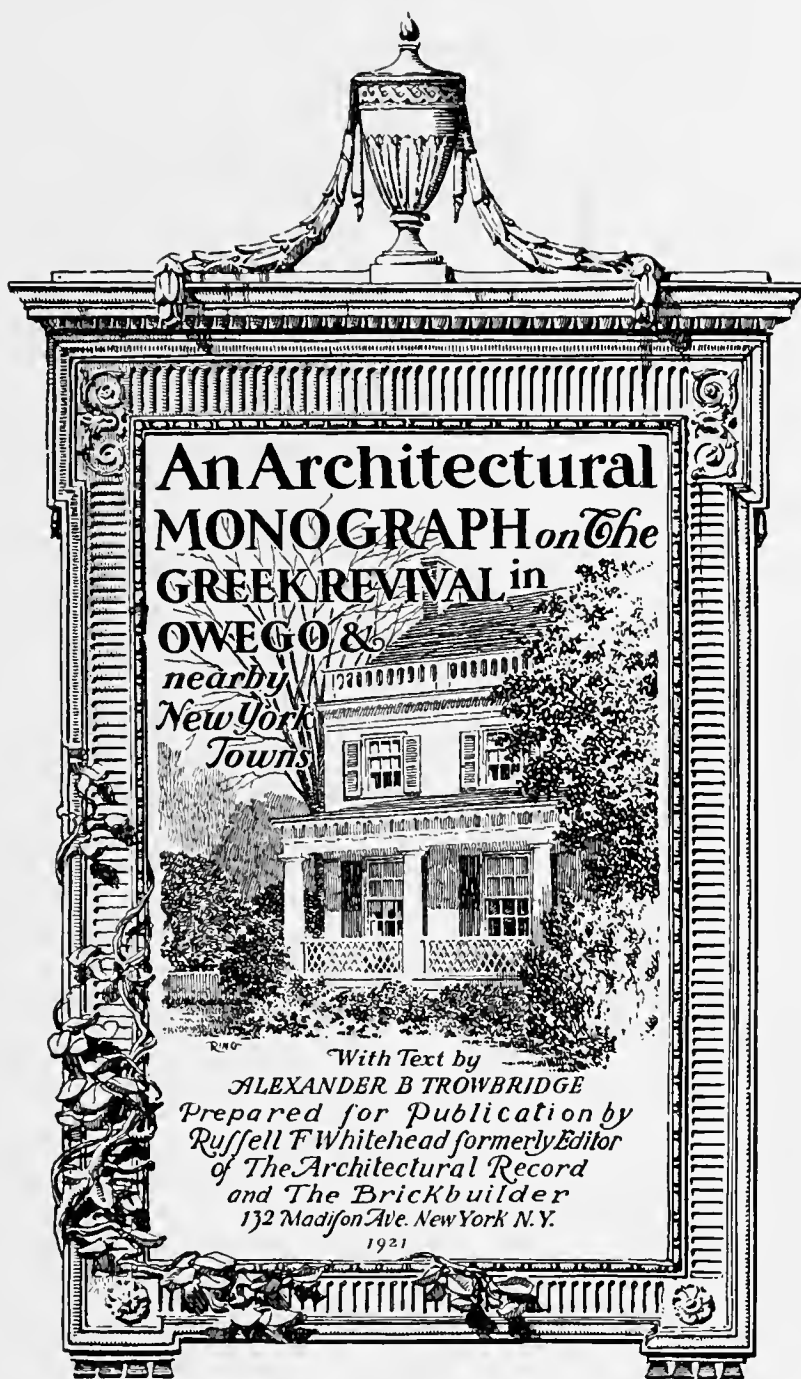


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THE
GREEK REVIVAL
IN OWEGO and
nearby New York Towns

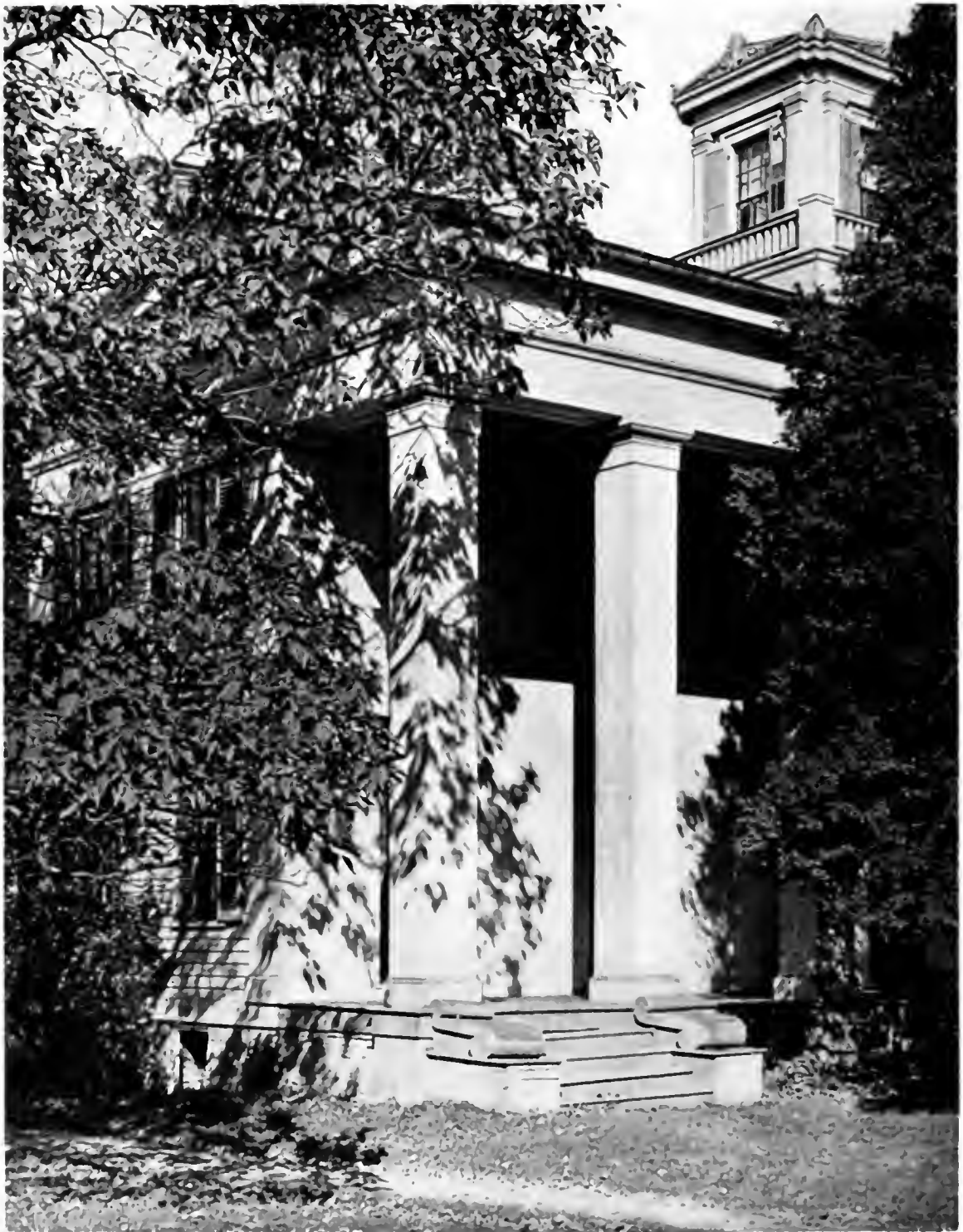
With Text by
Alexander B Trowbridge





An Architectural
MONOGRAPH on The
GREEK REVIVAL in
OWEGO &
nearby
New York
Towns

With Text by
ALEXANDER B TROWBRIDGE
Prepared for Publication by
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"VESPER CLIFF," OWEGO, NEW YORK.

Johnson-Platt House, built circa 1830

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AVAILABILITY TODAY AS A STRUCTURAL WOOD

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No. 3

THE GREEK REVIVAL IN OWEGO AND NEAR-BY NEW YORK TOWNS

SOME SUGGESTED ANTIDOTES

By ALEXANDER B. TROWBRIDGE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENNETH CLARK

YOU may think it strange that one should hesitate to write for so excellent a publication as *The White Pine Series*, but possibly you have not fully taken in the title of this Monograph. I was asked to write about some old houses in Owego and near-by towns in the southern part of Central New York, and, frankly and architecturally speaking, I had never heard of them. To be sure, I knew there were some old residences in Owego, built in 1830 or 1840, but, in common with most of my professional colleagues, I had never given them more than a passing glance. We architects as a class are peculiar in that once we make up our minds that a certain style or period is discredited by the profession, we "praise it with faint damns," if we speak of it at all. It may be that we are snobs, professionally, in not taking up with the Greek Revival, for example, and trying to evolve from it a style or a treatment which, when purged of the faults which are so evident, might result in an attractive residence architecture.

The editor was clever in sending as his emissary a young lady whose family for generations had lived in Owego and who knew so much about these old houses that she made me feel that I ought to write about them for my own good. And so here I am driving away at an article, surrounded by notes culled from a ponderous volume on the History of Tioga County, and by numerous photographs of the early architecture of that section of New York State.

What a wonderful place is the big library! When an employee is engaged to give out books it must be that a clause is inserted in the agree-

ment stipulating "courtesy is the essence of this contract." As I handed in my application slip for a history of Tioga County, my thoughts naturally turned to the earlier, more inviting periods of American architecture, when men were courtly and dressed the part. Their homes harmonized with their costumes. The architecture and the accompanying furnishings seem at this distance to have been perfectly in keeping with the social life of the time. There was a dignity, a repose befitting the life of a country gentleman, which is expressed in those old homes of New England and Virginia. At any rate, as I was on my quest and was surrounded by thousands of cubic feet of condensed wisdom, I had forgotten for the moment my former reluctance to write this monograph and was on my toes with expectancy. Well—what did I find? Instead of the powdered wigs, the satin breeches, the big silver-buckled shoes, and "Zounds, Gadzooks," and all that sort of thing, I found—I might have known it if I had thought at all—the frock-coat donned for daguerreotypes, the heavy boots of native cobbling, and, most disconcerting of all, whiskers which the Goldberg type of humorist likes to draw. Here was a nice situation. Can any one write upon an architecture connected with so unlovely a period? Think how different it would be to descant upon the good old days when precious china graced the tea ceremonies, and lovely hand-wrought silver was no curiosity but held its dignified place in hundreds of charming homes. In those days they had perfectly trained servants who could mix as well as serve. Think what we have come to when we have difficulty in getting any kind of servants and are

not any longer permitted to mix! And they had their graceful and courtly minuet with its quaint music, which also seemed to fit perfectly the china, the furniture, the wall-papers, etc. Is it absurd to assert that all these elements combined to create a naïve charm which is, after all, the essence of American Colonial? In the big book on Tioga County there were no references to things graceful or courtly. It was a farming country, the kind which furnishes the backbone of America. And when Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers to defend the Union, Tioga County was one of those communities which came to the scratch. But farming and patriotism—even when they are of the highest order—do not necessarily produce good architecture, and the houses of 1830 or 1840 reflected, as architecture always does, the degree of development of the people of that place and period.

That portion of New York which we are to discuss was, in the beginning, the habitat of the Iroquois tribes, the Oneidas, Mohawks, Cayugas, Senecas, Onondagas, etc. Tioga, the county in which the town of Owego sleeps, was given an Indian name meaning "at the forks," and was pronounced Te-yo-ge-ga by the Mohawks. Simplified spelling—which many suppose is a modern science—came to the rescue in those early days, the latter part of the eighteenth century, and Ti-o-ga it has been ever since. If something like simplified spelling could be introduced into architectural design, how much better our modern buildings would be! At any rate, in 1785, when Thomas Jefferson in Virginia was experimenting with snake-like brick fences and was making a national reputation as an authority on classic architecture, the only habitation on the site of the present town of Owego was a log-cabin built and occupied by Amos Draper. Now, if I may be pardoned for reviving a painful subject, a distillery was erected in Tioga County in 1800, though it was not until forty-four years later that the first

temperance organization of that section came into existence. The history states that six hard drinkers became conscience-smitten and formed this society to protect the good name of the community. One authority declares they feared all the liquor would be consumed unless some one took steps to reduce the consumption of the public and private stock, and that this temperance society was the logical expression of this fear. These theories do not appeal to me, for I am convinced that the introduction of Greek ornament in the houses built about this time was

the true cause of the temperance movement. If you study the embellishment on the Hollenbeck house on Front Street in Owego, you will see what I mean. The story goes that those same hard drinkers were returning one clear moonlight night from the "Lodge," and as they passed the Hollenbeck house they saw certain queer shapes frisking on the roof just above the eaves. Each one of the six was greatly startled but did not dare speak of the matter to any of the others. The next day they were all much relieved to note that what had frightened them so thoroughly was only a touch of the Greek Revival.

The experience sobered them and the temperance society followed. The two porches to the right and left of the portico were added later, and, while history says nothing about them, it is very clear that they were derived from the Teepee or wigwam style of architecture, doubtless as a compliment to the original owners of the land.

Why the citizens of this section of our country chose pseudo-Greek architecture translated rather unintelligently into wood is a secret that disappeared with the whiskers. It is clear, however, that the finest homes of that period indicated the approval of the Greek Revival by the best families.

Why does the average educated architect dismiss the Greek Revival with a shrug? Is it not because he notes that the translation from the



Detail of Doorway.
THE HOLLENBECK HOUSE, FRONT STREET,
OWEGO, NEW YORK.

stone architecture of classic days to a white pine treatment was merely badly done? Porticoes and pediments were given the scale of stone architecture, and the instinctive feeling for good wooden scale seemingly did not exist. There is no reason why Greek mouldings and Greek ornament should not be charmingly used to-day in wood architecture if the same respect for materials is shown which controlled the builders of good Colonial houses. In Colonial work we are perfectly aware of the classic origin, but we are not conscious of imitation. The charm of that

examine these photographs, therefore, to see whether really useful ideas cannot be gleaned from them.

The Hollenbeck house would be greatly improved by removing entirely the meaningless ornament nailed to the roof as a kind of snow guard. An architect who was studying design in Paris about twenty years ago was heard to remark, "I believe we should decorate where there's something doing"—a slangy way of expressing a great truth. Surely the snow guard referred to does not illustrate this principle. The



THE HOLLENBECK HOUSE, FRONT STREET, OWEGO, NEW YORK.

style lies in the naïve adaptation of a masonry architecture.

Lest this article should take on the appearance of a little slam, let me state that I have no desire to be unkind to my subject. When, however, one sees a clumsy attempt to execute in painted wood the proportions and the details of the lovely creations of the Periclean age, one cannot resist the impulse to poke fun at it. But is it not possible that, following the lead of the Colonial architects, we might be able to evolve delightful wooden houses by a use of Greek mouldings and Greek ornament controlled by an intelligent respect for our material? Let us

two wigwam porches also could be removed, greatly to the enhancement of the ensemble. A careful study of the portico cornice discloses a group of clumsy mouldings. The use of the Greek ornament in a form suggesting a low pediment is not bad *per se*, but it appears beaten down and looks as though a restudy in its relation to the portico entablature would greatly improve its ornamental value, particularly if the entire entablature were reduced in both width and height. The architrave appears not to stand over the outer line of the column at the upper diameter, but projects beyond, Greek fashion, thereby producing a heaviness which is not



THE MACKAY HOUSE, WILSEYVILLE, NEW YORK.

pleasing. Here is where strict subservience to Greek methods was unwise and the Roman custom would have been preferable.

The Mackay house in Willseyville is a very good example of the Greek Revival at its best, *i.e.*, there are evidences of book knowledge of Greek proportions and Greek mouldings, but the scale is so heavy as to interfere with the home-like, domestic character which a residence should possess. Who wants to live in a Greek temple, anyway?

There are no interior photographs to accompany these views, but one can picture the haircloth sofas, the braided hair ornaments, the wax flowers in glass cases, the front parlor used only for funerals and weddings, the heavy walnut furniture, and the kerosene lamps everywhere! I see the frock-coat, the alfalfa whiskers, the Irish upper lip, and the stern insistence upon selected reading and no music on Sundays. This has nothing particularly to do with the merits and defects of these houses, except that the austerity of the architecture is without doubt a reflection of the stiffness of the social life. Very likely the original owners of these formal and rather stately residences followed classical studies at Harvard or Yale or Union or Middlebury, and Greek architecture may have been the natural form of expression which followed those classical studies.

Suppose, now, we could redesign this house, without altering its plan. Would we not remove the immense entablatures on the wings, give a lighter touch to the main entablature of the portico, lighten somewhat the columns, refine the composition and the mouldings at the main entrance, and in every way give to the house a

wood scale? As the design now stands, it could be done in stone without these changes, and while a stone treatment would not result in a residential flavor, it would at least produce a more consistent architecture.

"Vesper Cliff" in Owego is saved by the splendid trees which shut out portions of the house and throw shadows of lovely pattern upon those portions which are exposed to view. It seems hypercritical to find fault with a picture

which has so much in it that is beautiful. But we must keep in mind that this is a residence, while it exhibits the solidity and the scale of a court house. The photograph discloses a custom which also appears in the Daniels house in Owego and in the Mill Street house in Ithaca, which the writer does not recall having seen in modern work, but which gives a certain charm in surprise, *i.e.*, the smooth surfaced wall behind the veranda columns, which contrasts in an interesting way with the clapboard treatment on the end. This is reversed in the Daniels house, where the smooth surface is on the end. In the Ithaca



THE DANIELS HOUSE, MAIN STREET,
OWEGO, NEW YORK.

house a combination of the two is shown. Is there not in this little suggestion much that is fruitful? Is not the central motive of the Ithaca house greatly benefited by the framing which it receives from the horizontal lines of the clapboards on each side? In "Vesper Cliff" the writer prefers the shadows on the smooth wall to those which fall on the siding. They seem to present a decoration more happily than they do on the end where the leafy shadows are rudely cut by the horizontal lines of the clapboarding.

The Daniels house looks like something which started out to be dressed in the costume of the



HOUSE AT 106 WATER STREET, ITHACA, NEW YORK.



THE DOWNS HOUSE, FRONT STREET, OWEGO, NEW YORK.

Greek Revival, but weakened at the last moment and fell back upon pseudo-Colonial details. It would take a seer to trace the origin of the detail of the main pilasters. Perhaps the inspiration came from mantelpieces, for there are many which show this Egyptian-like group of stems. Has any one in modern times tried this detail on large pilasters filling the entire panel instead of merely the middle third? It might be made an effective substitute for the classic

tween Owego and Nichols, are curious and rather interesting examples of the influence of both Dutch and Colonial work. The elliptical arches are probably inspired from Dutch brick buildings built near Syracuse. The cornice and pediment in the Nichols house are near Colonial. The window trim in the latter house shows true Colonial origin though it has the scale of a bedroom mantelpiece. The rosettes at the necks of the pilasters have a true Colonial flavor. The



HOUSE ON ROAD BETWEEN OWEGO AND NICHOLS, NEW YORK.

flutings which are the resort of the unimaginative. The modillions are obviously too short to give the appearance of doing effectively the work entrusted to them. The rake mouldings of the pediment do not return on the side of the building and their place is taken by a metal gutter. It is, of course, possible that the original gutter was of wood and that the continued concentration of moisture rotted the gutter while other sections of the cornice remained intact.

The next two houses, built in the town of Nichols, Tioga County, and in the country be-

purist deplores the arch turned in wood, but there can be no real objection to a treatment of the kind shown when the thickness of the arch is obviously too thin for anything except wood. It might have been better if the space between the top of the arch and the bed moulding of the cornice had been a little greater in each of these houses, merely to satisfy the eye. The house at Nichols was built by settlers who emigrated from New England. This accounts for the excellence of the detail, which, while not up to the grade of the best Colonial work, is



HOUSE AT NICHOLS, NEW YORK.

much better than the average in Tioga County. The house between Owego and Nichols, while less good in its mouldings and smaller details, contains architectural workmanship superior to that of the Nichols house. Note the wider space between the two middle pilasters and compare it with the even spacing in the Nichols house. Note also the skilful way in which the corner is handled (see detail photograph on page thirteen), where surfaces are placed to receive re-

it do to try the smooth wall surface on the main front, particularly as a field or background to these rather delicate window trims? One more thing—in any treatment in which elliptical arches are to take the place, on the front, of what otherwise would be a nearly completed entablature, would it not look much better not to have this horizontal fascia with bed moulding carry clear across the building at its maximum projection? I would much prefer to reduce this



DETAIL, HOUSE AT NICHOLS, NEW YORK.

turning mouldings and clapboards, and things look thought out. Now why not venture a modern house on the following lines: A principal motive composed somewhat like the house last referred to. The general conception of the detailing would follow the detail photograph, but the mouldings of pilaster cap, of cornice, and of pediment would be studied from good Colonial sources. The space over the arches might be increased and the trim around the windows might follow the type shown in the Nichols house, increased a little, in scale. How would

cornice member to the point where it would merely act as a cap moulding to the surface which is arched. This can be accomplished by returning this cornice member to the wall shortly after it turns the corner.

The Ithaca house has a charm all its own, but it lacks a setting. It needs trees and leafy shadows. The wood scale is delightfully felt and the contrast between the clapboards and the matched siding gives a happy effect. The window trim is nothing but a plain board which, when

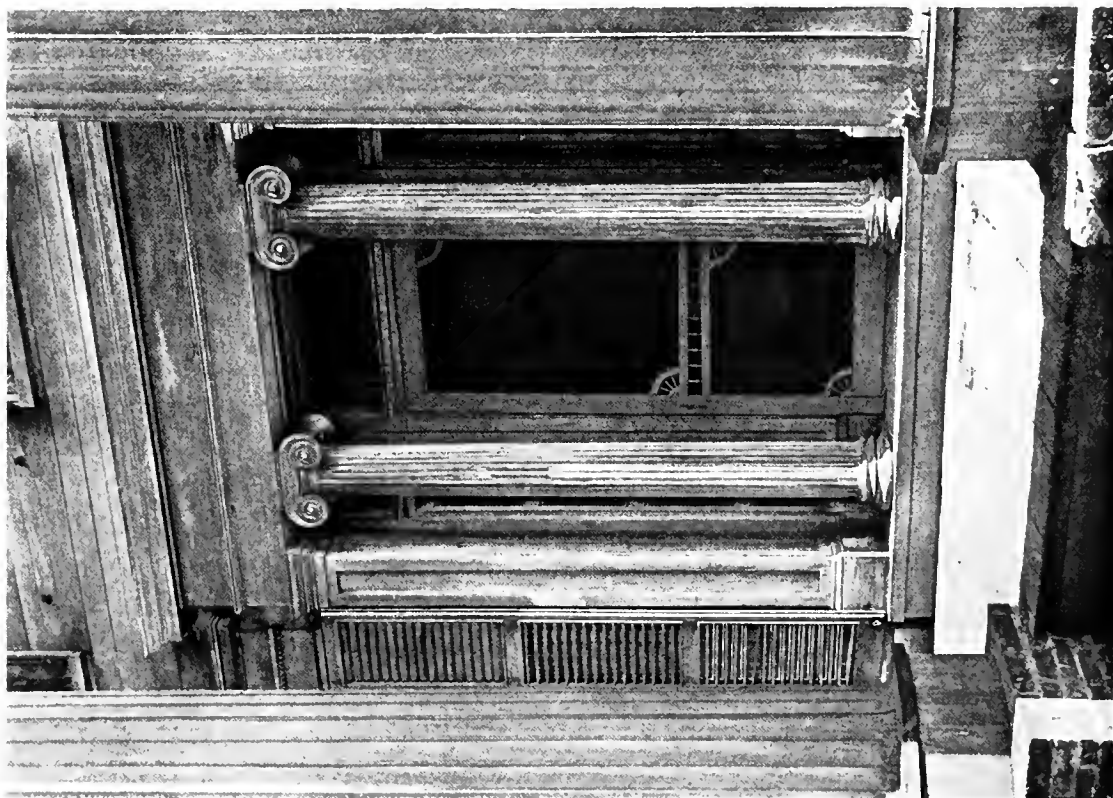
(Text continued on page sixteen)



Detail of Pilaster and Pediment.
HOUSE ON ROAD BETWEEN OWEGO AND NICOLLS, NEW YORK.



Detail of Pilaster and Pediment.
DANIELS HOUSE, OWEGO, NEW YORK.



Detail of Doorway.

MACKAY HOUSE, WILSEYVILLE, NEW YORK.



Detail of Doorway.

THE DOWNS HOUSE, OWEGO, NEW YORK.



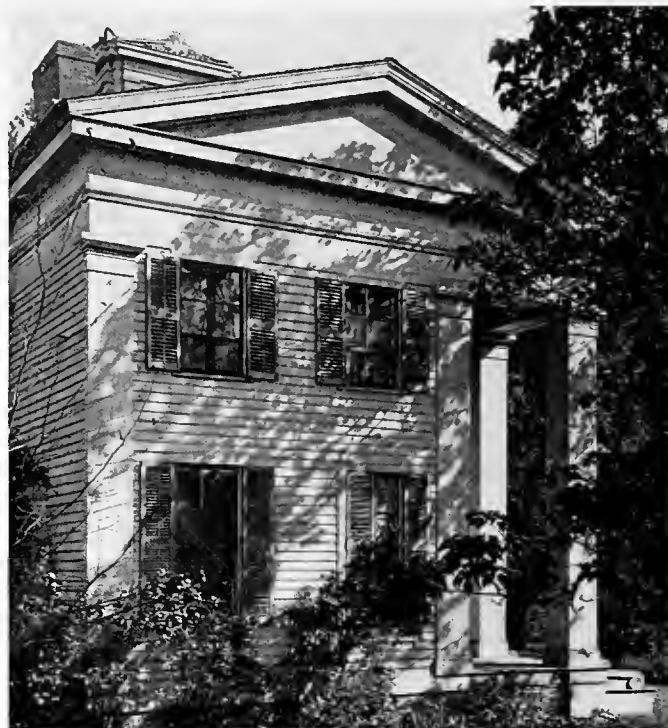
HOUSE AT 106 WATER STREET, ITHACA, NEW YORK. Detail of Doorway.

the blinds are open, is mainly covered up. This plain trim is entirely effective, for the proportions of the windows are good and a more elaborate trim is not required. An examination of the detail photograph on page fifteen of the entrance discloses a quaint scheme of carrying the flutes of the pilasters into the archivolt. The recessed door gives a sense of solidity to the construction, which almost looks like a trick to imitate stonework. It was undoubtedly derived from stone or brick architecture and is saved by the way the wood is treated on the face and in the jambs.

The Downs house in Owego is the last one to be mentioned, perhaps from an instinctive habit of reserving the best for the last. Here is a house which contains that subtle charm arising from good proportion which is a thing not to be defined or formulated. When it is done we pick out the things which explain the happy result—such as an entablature which is just right for wood architecture. The windows are grouped so as to give good sturdy corner wall spaces. The window trim is ornamented only at the top—where the trim shows. The roof is unspoiled by dormer windows and therefore helps to accentuate the simplicity of the whole. I would add that the portico is not worthy of imitation. The capitals suggest the Greek Revival, as if the house is, in the main, much older

than the porch. The entablature and railing of the portico are crude, and the two outer columns do not seem properly related to the corners of the half octagon which they support. The portico entablature suggests, however, the very great relief to be found in devising this element of the building without resort to the cut-and-dried architrave frieze and cornice. A simple architrave for structural appearance, a modified frieze, and a very much modified cornice consisting of bed mould and a projecting drip moulding, are all that the portico needs, to give it its proper relative importance. As it now stands, the portico is a bit out of scale with the rest of the house, and not as well worked out.

We may assume that those houses having entrances at one side have stairs also at the side and a hall bedroom over the entrance hall. Those like the Downs house very probably have the hall running through the house with a door on the rear end opening into a garden. This type of plan was commonly used at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and is most livable and homelike if appropriately furnished. It is doubtful if we could learn much even if we had plans drawn to scale, for the plan arrangements would in no sense be different from hundreds of other houses of the period, and not as good as the Colonial places evolved a half-century earlier.



"VESPER CLIFF," OWEGO, NEW YORK.

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